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# James Connolly: Irish Republican Leader and International Socialist

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*In this brief sketch of James Connolly, I avoided the present-day developments in Ireland. If I must refer to them at all it will be in this foreword. In the early days of the war Arthur Griffith was for passive neutrality while Connolly was actively opposed to any participation in the war. MacNeill was opposed to the 1916 rebellion, as were Griffith and others now prominent in the Irish Free State, but Connolly said, "We must fight or be disgraced for all time." When the final decision to revolt was made it was Connolly's influence and vote that forced it. He was severely wounded and taken prisoner on the fourth or fifth day of the fighting and, contrary to the solemn promise made in the House of Commons by the then Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, that Connolly would not be shot, on May 12, 1916, he was propped up on a stretcher and murdered by a British firing squad in violation of the civilized rules of warfare and the humanitarian codes that have done much to soften the harshness and savagery of the world.*

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Of all the men who played a prominent part in the Socialist movement and who contributed something vital to its literature and something permanent to its structure, few are as little known as James Connolly. It is true because of his dramatic and tragic end the name of Connolly became universally known, and to a certain extent almost equally universally misunderstood.

Misled by the press and their own lack of industry, many people think Connolly was a man of narrow views, with no cosmopolitan grasp of life, and a leader of a forlorn hope in a fight to establish an old brand of petty parochialism with a new and strange name.

It was the contrary. His vision was large and bounded by no parochial horizons. If he saw the world and its all-embracing class struggle, he did not shut his eyes to the elemental facts that are the warp and woof of the universe. There are people who view the forest, but cannot distinguish the trees. But James Connolly was not of that race. His vision embraced and perceived the little as well as the great things.

He was a nationalist in the best and highest sense of that much-abused and very much misunderstood word. As he once happily wrote it in *The Worker* and in *The Harp*: "We can love ourselves without hating our neighbors." His sympathy for the Irish nationalist movement, while the sum of many noble men's ambitions and ideals was to Connolly the means, if not the beginning of a great end, the turning point of the road that leads through oppressed nations to the liberation of all peoples — the human race.

Starting as a pioneer, as a new evangel in the greatest movement the world ever experienced, Connolly, it can be said, watched it in its infancy, in the cradle. In Great Britain he labored with Hardie, John Burns, [Henry] Hyndman, and others of the old guard. for years he followed the rough and thorny path of the volunteer agitator. And there are few, very few, today in the labor movement who know of the awful struggles and terrible sufferings that the early apostles of social freedom endured. The bearer of the fiery cross, the man who upheld the international banner in those far-off days, practically selected a life of endless toil and heartless persecution and which sometimes led to Calvary.

But Connolly was not the kind of man who starts things and leaves them in a crisis. If he watched the [Second] International in its infancy it might be said he followed it to the grave. Had he not been killed he would probably, like Kier Hardie, have died of a broken heart. For none could look on and see the temple they built defiled by traitors in the name of liberty, or wrecked in the hypocritical cry of small nations and sacred treaties. As a Marxian Socialist he knew that, though the International was betrayed, the fight for freedom must go on and on until it ends in victory. For the labor movement does not buttress itself with victories; unlike all historic movements it marches from defeat to defeat, accumulating experience as it pushes itself onward, until it finally mounts the peak of victory from which there is no recession nor reaction.

Except for a handful of idealists and alleged cranks and conscientious objectors, England and Scotland went war mad. Belgium must be saved and treaties respected. The Boer War, the Sudan, Egypt, India, China, and Ireland were forgotten. Hyndman turned chauvinist and Will Thorne, the politically adopted child of Eleanor Marx, became a colonel in the army.

Not so in Ireland. Redmond's oratory nor all the specious please regarding the shrines of Belgium, the altars of France,, could make the mass of the country budge from their neutral stand. They and all the gilded hirelings of the capitalist and governmental class of England next turned to and concentrated all their efforts to force or cajole the proletariat of the cities and towns into the cannon fodder brigade. but they met with a new and more relentless opposition from Connolly and his colleagues. With a logic based not on sentiment, but on historical science, and with argumentation that was characteristic of Connolly — terse, bitter, and forcible — he ruthlessly tore down the shams of the government and routed its forces everywhere. Connolly nailed to the mast his colors in the shape of the following declaration hung on the front of Liberty Hall: "We fight for neither king nor kaiser; we fight for the working class."

The government seeing its defeat everywhere in the forum and the rostrum began the diabolical scheme to destroy the manhood of Ireland in one fell swoop. A pogrom of the leaders of the people was planned and with its success wholesale conscription of all men under 45, and a deportation to Flanders. Connolly and his associates saw discussion had ended and force was begun. He, too, resorted to force and bravely he battled against overwhelming odds and superior equipment for a a week, and was defeated. But the government, though wining the battle, lost the victory. They failed to achieve that which they had set out to accomplish. And, of course, the end was everything. A few thousand were killed in the street fighting and in the executions that followed it. And what no other country in the world could boast of, the intellectuals of Ireland — the light of the world, the salt of the earth, Pearse, Skeffington, McDonough, etc. — were slaughtered while grasping the brand from the burning. They saved their country. A few thousand were killed, but a half mllion are alive today to carry on the historic struggle.

"Had the war party succeeded and had we not fought," Connolly said, "we would have been disgraced for all time." Having the advantage of hindsight, we can now see that whatever there may be to

shame or disgrace in a national sense (diplomats say there is no such thing, except in losing the spoils), Connolly and his sturdy band of fighters built better than they knew when they planned the rising of April-May 1916. In keeping their young men off the field of carnage they saved the race and preserved Ireland as an entity in the family of nations; for, except as a geographical expression, Ireland would be no more.

The historian would have been justified in writing "Finis" when he had recorded the events of 1915 and the spring of 1916. Instead of a ruined land, populated with old men and women, and harmless for all time, as the imperialists of London planned, the nation was re-born. Physically it was saved and spiritually it was given a new birth. The vision of Connolly was not buried in his quick-lime grave on May 12, 1916. No, the divine fire that burned within him passed on to and was grasped by his young countrymen, and through it a land of slaves was converted into a nation of revolutionists.

If Connolly did a lasting service to his country he rendered an equally great service to the Socialist movement. Besides his work as an agitator and organizer in the pioneer days and later in our own time Connolly, by his writings and historical research, contributed his share to the arch of industrial democracy and a column to the great international temple that will yet cover the earth and have established for all time the trinity of bread, beauty, and brotherhood which the human race in its darkest hours never lost sight of.

His pamphlets, even today, are well worth reading, especially those entitled *The New Evangel* and *Socialism Made Easy*. His larger and more ambitious work, *Labor in Irish History*, should be in the library of every Socialist. This last is his literary monument. Nor should his Labor Poems be forgotten. "The Dying Socialist's Legacy" is not alone a great poem; it is a great sermon. Those who talk of world revolution so glibly nowadays, when they have not an organization large enough to hold a barricade, could read that great poem with profit to themselves and their friends.

The American phase of Connolly's life deserves more notice, but as this article is getting dangerously near the limitation of space I cannot but barely recite a few facts in this sketch.

He first visited the United States as a lecturer under Socialist Labor Party auspices. I believe it was in 1903. His trip, though begun under a most tragic atmosphere (his oldest child having been burned to death) was on the whole, and considering the circumstances that

obtained, very successful. He was then representing the Irish Socialist Republican Party and was editor of its organ, *The Workers' Republic*. Connolly visited the United States a second time, not as a lecturer, but as an emigrant. He brought his family along with him, and so desperate was the struggle to keep the wolf from the door that he was scarcely able to tell which was the most acute brand of poverty — the Irish or the American. Many a time when nearly on his feet and about to turn the corner his prospects darkened, or were beclouded by some unforeseen and unpreventable circumstance.

While in the Socialist Labor Party he engaged in a controversy with Daniel DeLeon over “Wages and Prices.” Though treated rather high-handedly, Connolly was scarcely the worse for the bitter duel, and I believe he had the better of the argument.

For a short period he was an organizer for the IWW in the New York district, when William E. Trautman was its General Secretary. The year before he returned to Ireland he had the most successful tour of the country under the auspices of the National Office of the Socialist Party. This was his best and happiest time while in the United States.

In ability and character Connolly was above the average run of men. George Birmingham, the writer, says Connolly was the greatest Irishman of his time. Though handicapped from birth by the most extreme poverty and suffering impaired health he managed to equip himself in a manner equal to those who had the advantages of comfort and education. Besides Gaelic and English he had a good working knowledge of the French and Italian languages. In his speeches he displayed both learning and wit. The manner in which he delivered his addresses showed that he was not alone possessed of resources, but had a capable and well-organized mind.

It will not be hard to find Connolly's place in history. In the Socialist column he will stand with Jaurès, Hardie, and Debs, and in Irish pages he will join the great succession of Tone, Emmet, Mitchel, Lalor, and Davitt. He was one of Ireland's great men. He will have successors in the fight. He will hardly have any equals in endurance.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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